Three Portraits on the Way to Carmel:
Ahab, Obadiah, and Elijah in I Kings 18:1–20

"So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

Introduction

The three and a half years[1] that began with Elijah's announcement of drought before King Ahab have come to an end. During that time, the prophet was hidden by God at the Kerith Ravine and later in a widow's home in Zarephath. He learned to depend on God through testing his faith, and he saw God's sovereign grace at work in a Gentile woman who had no prior claim to Israel's covenant promises. Now, as chapter 18 of 1 Kings opens, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah again, and his instructions are clear: present yourself to Ahab, for God is about to send rain.

The drought was intended, among other things, to humble Israel and bring the nation back to the Lord. However, the Scripture offers no indication that such a turning had actually taken place. The king seemed as hardened as ever, and chapter 18 clearly shows that Jezebel had been allowed to carry out a sustained slaughter of the Lord's prophets during this time. Yet God, in His mercy and sovereign control of times and events, had decided that the moment for relief had arrived. Psalm 102:13 speaks to this divine timing: "You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favor to her; the appointed time has come." Israel's need for repentance still remained, and it would be dealt with in the most public and dramatic way imaginable on Mount Carmel. But first, the events of chapter 18 leading up to that confrontation deserve careful attention, because within them we find three figures who together present a richly instructive study in human character.

[1] First Kings 18:1 notes only that Elijah appeared before Ahab "in the third year," referring most likely to the third year of the prophet's time in hiding. The full duration of three and a half years rests on the New Testament witness of both Jesus and James, who each specify this period explicitly (Luke 4:25; James 5:17).

Ahab: The Hard Heart

Ahab, the son of Omri, ruled over Israel during one of the darkest periods in the northern kingdom's history. The inspired account in 1 Kings 16:30 clearly states that he committed more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any king before him, a sobering judgment given how wicked previous kings had been. The standard for royal wickedness in Israel had long been Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, a man whose name became so associated with covenant betrayal that later kings' accusations against him were compared to his sin. Outdoing Jeroboam was no small achievement! Yet Ahab achieved just that.

He not only carried on the idol worship and sins of Jeroboam but went much further, marrying Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and showing a devotion to Baal that he never displayed to the one true God of Israel. He built an altar to Baal in the temple of Baal, which he constructed in Samaria, and erected an Asherah pole, stirring the Lord’s anger in ways no previous Israelite king had achieved. The man standing before Elijah in chapter 18 was the most spiritually corrupt king Israel had ever seen, and their encounter offers a vivid picture of a hardened heart fully exposed.

The most striking characteristic is a total lack of awareness that God’s hand was behind the judgment. After three and a half years of drought, one might expect Ahab to be desperately concerned with what the nation had done to cause such a disaster. Instead, verse 5 shows his real concern: he was searching the land for grass to feed his horses and mules. There is not a single mention of God, nor of the people. Ahab’s focus was solely on finding relief from the drought’s effects, while remaining completely indifferent to its cause. Arthur Pink highlights this with his usual clarity. He writes,

> As a straw in the air reveals the direction of the wind, so these words of Ahab indicate the state of his heart. The living God had no place in his thoughts, nor was he exercised over the sins which had called down His displeasure on the land. Nor does he seem to have been the least concerned about his subjects, whose welfare, next to the glory of God, should have been his chief concern. No, his aspirations do not appear to have risen any higher than fountains and brooks, horses and mules, that the beasts which yet remained might be saved. This is not

> evolution but devolution, for when the heart is estranged from its Maker its direction is ever lower and lower.[2]

This pattern of refusing to recognize God's hand in judgment is not unique to Ahab. A classic example in Scripture is the story of Pharaoh during the plagues in Egypt. Time and again, the account shows that Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he refused to let Israel go, even as each new plague clearly demonstrated that the God of Israel was in full control. Even after Pharaoh finally permitted Israel to leave, his heart was hardened again, and he chased after them. The same pattern appears in the book of Revelation, where, in the account of the seven bowls of wrath, those under judgment do not repent but instead curse (Revelation 16:10). The prophet Jeremiah also observed the same behavior in his own time: "O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth? You have struck them down, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent" (Jeremiah 5:3).

These passages reveal a sobering truth about the nature of sin and the human heart without grace. There is a persistent refusal to repent even when faced with unquestionable divine displeasure. This refusal is a key sign of a hardened heart. We see the same pattern today. Despite clear evidence of the consequences of moral and spiritual rebellion against God, there is surprisingly little genuine concern for His judgment, whether it involves current punishments from sin or the final judgment that awaits everyone. The Apostle Paul, quoting from Psalm 36, in his letter to the church in Rome, summarizes the hardened, sinful heart when he wrote, "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:18).

The second characteristic of Ahab's hardened heart is also revealing. When Elijah finally appeared before him in verses 16 and 17 of chapter 18, Ahab's greeting was accusatory: "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" The man who had led the nation into idolatry, married the evil woman Jezebel, built altars to Baal, and provoked the Lord more than any previous king, blamed the prophet of God for the nation's suffering! He shows no awareness of his own sin, no self-reflection, and no admission of responsibility. Arthur Pink's comments on this exchange are so insightful. He writes,

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[2]Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of Elijah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 106.

> "Art thou he that troubleth Israel? How the words of our lips betray the state of our hearts! Such language from the king after the sore judgment which God had sent upon his dominion revealed the hardness and impenitency of his heart. Consider the opportunities which had been given him. He was warned by the prophet of the certain consequences that would follow his continuance in sin. He had seen that what the prophet had announced surely came to pass. It had been demonstrated before his eyes that the idols which he and Jezebel worshipped could not avert the calamity nor give the rain which was so urgently needed. There was everything to convince him that 'the Lord God of Elijah' was the sovereign Ruler of heaven and earth, whose decree none can disannul and whose almighty arm no power can withstand."[3]

The urge to blame others rather than admit guilt has a long tradition. It goes back to the very beginning in the Garden of Eden, where Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, neither taking responsibility for their actions. There is something in fallen human nature (I suggest pride) that instinctively avoids admitting fault and resists owning up to wrongdoings. Ahab's accusation of Elijah is simply that ancient, sinful urge at work.

Elijah's reply in chapter 18, verse 18, provides an example of clear and brave confrontation. He firmly places the blame where it belongs: it was Ahab and his family who caused trouble for Israel by abandoning God's commandments and worshiping Baal. At the heart of Ahab's wickedness was outright rebellion against God's law. The Apostle John captures this when he writes that "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Ahab had not drifted from God carelessly. He had deliberately turned his back on every covenant obligation, and Elijah, with great courage, refused to ignore it.

Roger Ellsworth thoughtfully considers the importance of this exchange. He writes,

> This passage ought to be of great interest to each and every child of God for one very good reason, the debate of Elijah and Ahab is still going on. There is no argument today on whether our society is in trouble. Only the most obtuse conclude otherwise. Homes continue to fall apart at an astonishing pace. Sexual perversions of the rawest sort are endorsed and dignified on television, in the movies and in magazines. Drug addiction, crime, corruption in business and government, dishonesty in the workplace are all prime indicators that there is deep and undeniable trouble. The hotly disputed question is the same as it was with Elijah and Ahab, what or who is the source of the trouble in our society? On this matter there is no shortage of answers. Some say lack of education is what

[3]Pink, *The Life of Elijah*, 111.

> keeps our society from dealing successfully with all its problems. Some say government is the cause of the trouble. And some, like Ahab, actually go so far as to accuse the godly of being the trouble makers. We are told, for instance, that many things, abortion, sexual perversions, pornography, are not really problems at all. The problem is Christians going around teaching that these are problems and making everyone feel guilty. Some do not hesitate to say our greatest problem is bigoted Christians trying to impose their views on everyone else. As Elijah refused to accept the blame assigned him by Ahab, Christians today must learn to say boldly that those who stand for God are not society's enemies but its greatest friends. As we look closely at Elijah's response to the king, we notice that Elijah did not simply deny the accusation but went on to put the blame squarely where it belonged, on the violation of God's laws and on the vacillation of God's people.[4]

Before moving on from Ahab, it is worth considering a question his portrait raises. What makes Ahab different from us, aside from God's grace? The Apostle Paul asks a similar question in 1 Corinthians 4:7: "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" In his letter to the Ephesians, he describes what every believer once was: "among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:3-5). Ahab's hardened heart is not merely an example from long ago to be observed. Without God's sovereign mercy and grace in the gospel, this is what we once were, and what we would still be. Understanding the extent of our remaining sin and God's love and grace in the gospel should humble everyone. Let no one reading this passage overlook that sobering truth.

Obadiah: The Believer in the World

The second portrait for our review, introduced in chapter 18, is nearly the exact opposite of Ahab. Obadiah, who was in charge of Ahab’s palace, is described in 18:3 as a follower of the Lord, a man who greatly fears the Lord (verse 12). He holds a position of significant responsibility at the heart of one of Israel’s most corrupt royal administrations, yet he is characterized by his devotion and his fear of God.

[4]Roger Ellsworth, *Standing for God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 54–55.

Obadiah's character has been assessed in various ways by commentators. Ellsworth describes him as "faithful but faint-hearted," citing his close alignment with Ahab's household and his reluctance to carry out Elijah's instructions as evidence of a certain timidity. Pink rejects this assessment and strongly defends Obadiah as a thoroughly godly man. The debate itself is instructive, for it reminds us that Scripture often presents us with complex figures who do not fit neatly into categories of hero or failure. Obadiah is a man of real faith who also wrestles with fear, making him a deeply human figure. He is, in many ways, like most of us.

The question of whether Obadiah was compromised by his position in Ahab's palace deserves our attention. A believer holding a position of influence under an ungodly ruler is not automatically evidence of compromise. Joseph served Pharaoh and was clearly in the right place by God's design. Daniel served Nebuchadnezzar and Darius with impeccable integrity. In both cases, their proximity to ungodly power was the means through which God accomplished His purposes. The key question is not where a believer serves but how. Does his conduct in that role testify to his faith, or does it hide it?

The same pattern appears throughout history. One well-known example is William Wilberforce's coming to saving faith. He questioned whether he could remain in Parliament. The political world of 18th-century England felt incompatible with genuine Christian discipleship. He walked anxiously in the park before finally seeking advice from John Newton, the former slave trader turned minister and hymn writer. Newton, who understood that God often uses a person's past and position in unexpected ways, advised Wilberforce to stay. He told him that Parliament needed a man of conscience inside. History confirmed that advice. Wilberforce spent the next several decades as the conscience of the British Empire, and the slave trade, which he tirelessly fought against, was finally abolished in 1807.

In Obadiah's case, the evidence shows he was a loyal witness. Verse 3 of chapter 18 describes him as someone who greatly feared the Lord, a phrase that suggests a consistent and visible dedication. Ahab himself would have known exactly where his palace administrator's loyalty lay. Obadiah's notable act of hiding 100 of the Lord's prophets in two caves and providing them with bread and water while Jezebel was hunting them down (verse 4) is not the act of a halfhearted man. It was an act of exceptional courage and compassion, likely undertaken

at great personal risk. F.W. Krummacher reflects on what this faithful witness before the ungodly signifies. He writes,

> "It was *greatly* that he feared the Lord. This is indeed a noble testimonial concerning him. For truly it was something great to fear the Lord with all his heart, at a time, and in a country, wherein the true worshippers of Jehovah were exposed to public scorn and derision. It was also something great to adhere faithfully to the Lord, when surrounded by persons bitterly prejudiced against real godliness, and by religious and political institutions set up in direct opposition to the true worship and service of Jehovah. To abide in the faith at a court, where the god of this world had blinded the eyes of the powerful, and had provided every possible temptation to follow the vicious fashions of the day, to keep himself unspotted from the world in a post of honor and responsibility, with the eyes of the public fixed upon him, and all his prosperity depending on the favor of the king, to hold on his course in a situation in which he had frequently to communicate with the most profligate among the great, to fear God, not by halves, but fully, to be no time-server, but to serve the Lord and him alone, this was surely something great in Obadiah. But who then is to be praised for this? The great Obadiah? Far from it, To God and his omnipotent grace be all the glory! Let this picture of Obadiah be held up to the consideration of those who are so ready to object that their situation and circumstances prevent them from faithfully serving God."[5]

The lesson Obadiah's life teaches us is one that every believer living and working amid an unbelieving world needs to hear. No matter what position a Christian holds, whom he associates with, or the environment he inhabits, the call to consistent and uncompromising Christian living remains the same. Paul wrote to the Colossians: "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time" (Colossians 4:5). Obadiah reminds us that the most impactful Christian witness is often not a single sensational act but the consistent and faithful daily testimony of a life that is visibly different because it belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Obadiah's encounter with Elijah in 1 Kings 18:7–16 is another side of his character. When Elijah instructed him to go and tell Ahab that Elijah was present and wished to appear before him, Obadiah was deeply troubled. He laid out his concerns in careful detail. He knew what Ahab had done searching for Elijah throughout the surrounding nations. He feared that if he went to Ahab and told him Elijah was there, God might send Elijah somewhere else in the meantime, leaving Obadiah holding the report of a prophet no one could find, which would cost

[5]F. W. Krummacher, *Elijah the Tishbite* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992), 66–67.

him his life. One could hardly fault him for thinking as he did, but it was, at that moment, reasoning by sight rather than by faith.

The Apostle Paul's principle applies here directly: "We live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). The parallel to Peter walking on the water in Matthew 14 is instructive. Peter stepped out of the boat at Christ's word and was doing remarkably well until he fixed his eyes on the wind and the waves. It was not the storm that sank him but the shift in his gaze. Obadiah's problem at this moment was similar. He was looking too much at the circumstances and not enough at the plain word of God's prophet standing before him. Believers in every generation struggle with this. We live in a world with all its pressures, uncertainties, and genuine dangers, and the temptation to let those realities eclipse the Word of God is constant.

Elijah's command to Obadiah was also a test of his faith, similar to the commands God had previously given Elijah in the wilderness. The Word of God, represented by Elijah, was asking Obadiah to do something that went against his natural desires and his assessment of the risks. This is exactly how faith is tested and developed. The last time we see Obadiah in verse 16, he went and found Ahab and reported to him, finally obedient to the word he had received. Krummacher highlights the importance of this conclusion.

> "The end of the Lord" was now attained in this instance of Obadiah. Self-humiliation had been effected in him, and the light was again suffered to shine upon him. Elijah said, "As the Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto Ahab today." This composed the fears of his troubled heart; so Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and he had now sufficient boldness to tell the tyrant, "Behold, Elijah is here."[6]

There is likely an Obadiah in most of us. We are cautious souls who love the Lord, and yet we can be paralyzed by what obedience might cost. God is patient with us, as He was with Obadiah, but He does not leave us there. He sends His word to us, sometimes through Scripture, sometimes through the counsel of a godly friend, and that word calls us out of our fears and into trust. The question He puts to every believer is ultimately simple. Will you walk by sight, or will you walk by faith?

[6] F. W. Krummacher, *Elijah the Tishbite*, 73.

Elijah: The Authority of God's Word

Elijah stands out as the voice and presence of God's word, speaking with a confidence that neither Ahab's authority nor Obadiah's worries could shake. His approach to both men is guided by a truth expressed in Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases." Elijah understood he was not stepping into a situation ruled by human power. He entered with the assurance that God, not the king, was in control.

One of the most striking scenes in the chapter is the encounter between Elijah and Ahab in 1 Kings 18:19–20. Elijah told Israel's most notorious king to gather the entire nation, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, at Mount Carmel. What is somewhat surprising is that Ahab did exactly as he was told. Verse 20 describes it simply and directly, much like Elijah's own response in chapter 17: Ahab sent out the word to all Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. There was no debate, no bargaining, no hesitation. The same king who had resisted repentance through years of drought now followed the prophet's command without question, even though he had once called Elijah the troubler of Israel. This is a vivid demonstration of the truth Isaiah declared: "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). The Word of God moves with sovereign authority through human history, bending even the most resistant wills in the service of God's purposes. Ahab had no idea that in gathering the people and the prophets to Mount Carmel, he was setting the stage for one of the most spectacular demonstrations of the living God's power in all of the Old Testament. He thought he was responding to a summons from a troublesome prophet. He was, in fact, an instrument in the hand of the God he had spent his life defying.

Conclusion

The three portraits in 1 Kings 18:1–20 are simply drawn but rich with meaning. Ahab depicts the hardened heart in its typical stance: blind to God's judgment, refusing to repent, unwilling to admit sin, and quick to blame others. He also reflects our own condition when grace is absent. Obadiah shows a believer in the world: truly devoted, capable of great courage, yet vulnerable to the human temptation to rely on sight rather than faith when facing hardship. Elijah represents the Word of God acting with sovereign power: commanding a king and comforting a

frightened servant, moving steadily toward its purpose regardless of their reactions. The scene was now set. All of Israel, the prophets of Baal and Asherah, and God's servant would gather on Mount Carmel. The question that had loomed over the nation for three and a half years would be answered publicly and definitively: who is God in Israel? Is it Baal, or is it Jehovah?